“Lacking the Proper Authority”:
How Women Found Their Voice in Public Radio

A Thesis to the Honors Tutorial College
Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
from the Honors Tutorial College
with the degree of
Bachelor of Science in Journalism

By April Laissle
July 2015
Introduction

In the early days of radio, a scan through the dial would return mostly static. Broadcasters were jumping at opportunities to fill the ether with almost anything they could find. However, their typically low standards still came with some limitations. To scientists at Bell Laboratories, the “radio soprano” or the female voice, had no place in radio. In a 1928 article published in Scientific American, Bell Scientist J.C. Steinberg surmised that women simply had less distinct voices, and when those voices were changed into the electrical impulses of radio, audiences would likely recoil. He claimed the radio had been designed to create sounds that would please audiences, so the device would likely “impair the reproduction” of high-pitched voices (Mitchell, 26). That theory didn’t entirely disappear as the medium aged. Fifty years later, female voices were still criticized for “lacking the proper authority to present the news, for being shrill, or both high-pitched and emotionally intense, and irritating” (Loviglio, 74).

With ideas like those plaguing the medium, it may be difficult to believe any segment of radio broadcasting could offer a hospitable place for women to build careers today. However, research suggests it has, at least for women in journalism. This is particularly surprising when industry demographics are considered. Today, women make up only about one third of all working journalists, even though than two thirds of all journalism school graduates are women (Everbach, 53). In public radio, those numbers are significantly different. Data collected by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting reveals that 43 percent public radio newsroom employees are women (Marcotte). Although women occupy only 35 percent of newspaper supervisors
(Griffin, 30), 44 percent of senior leadership positions in public radio belong to women (Marcotte). The reasons for this disparity between public and commercial media are distinct and varied. In order to understand them, it is first important to examine why women are missing from the field of journalism as whole, and also to explore the barriers to success women face in all segments of the workforce.

I choose to tackle these questions first through a scholarly analysis, but also by interviewing women in public radio industry. These interviews became three separate podcast pieces of audio journalism. The first explores the hiring decisions made during the formation of National Public radio. The second explores the effects of mentorship in the public radio industry by focusing on a New York based women’s radio producers networking group. The third is an extended interview with Neenah Ellis, the general manager of NPR member station WYSO and a former producer at All Things Considered.

1. Women in Journalism

Historical Role of Women in Journalism

Although women have consistently been underrepresented in the field of news reporting, the twentieth century was a time of significant change for female journalists. In 1901, women made up about 9 percent of all newspaper reporters (Franks, 9). This low number is often attributed to the social conventions of the era that dictated rigid gender roles in society. Traditionally, women were discouraged from seeking higher education, married at young ages and were expected to tend to children full-time. Some employers created policies to reflect these
social conventions. In 1932, the BBC instituted what was known as “the Marriage Bar.” The rule prohibited married women from being employed at the company. Many other companies followed this example (Franks, 9). When women did work, they were expected pursue more traditionally female careers such as nursing or teaching. However, by 1961, the percentage of women working in journalism more than doubled to 20 percent. Today, about one third of all working journalists are women (Griffin, 32). Several factors contributed to this increase as well as to the persistent gender gap in professional journalism.

The nature of news reporting may have discouraged women from pursuing careers in journalism and employers from considering them for these positions. In the early decades of the twentieth century, newspaper reporting was seen as a dangerous occupation for women. The long, irregular hours required in reporting often restricted women’s participation in the industry. Even if women were willing or able to contend with the unusual lifestyle that accompanied the job, editors were often unwilling to hire them. Although these attitudes often reflected the social values of the time, by many accounts they became engrained in newsroom culture even as social norms changed. As late as in a 1973 report about women working for the British Broadcasting Company, a senior manager was quoted saying women were “unable to work in the cold and the wet and ... are not able to make overnight stays with a man as their wives would not like it” (Franks, 3).

This attitude was also common in the world of broadcasting: When commercial radio was popularized in the 1920s, broadcasting was considered as unsuitable a job for women as news reporting. News broadcasters also lead lifestyles characterized by frequent travel and unusual work hours. Just as it did for newspaper reporters, this served as a barrier to entry for women.
Women looking to pursue careers in radio also had to contend with the prominent stereotypes of the era. At the time, women were considered less adept at public speaking than their male counterpart (Karpf, 36). This was not the only workplace attitude that presented a challenge to women in broadcasting.

When more women were given jobs in radio towards the end of 1920s, they were given sub-par assignments tailored to the gender norms of the time (Hilmes, 130). Women who worked in on-air radio broadcasting were often relegated to roles as homemakers, secretaries, etc. in radio dramas. They were also frequently used as side-kicks to the male radio hosts, also known as “giggle girls” (Hilmes, 136). Instances of outright discrimination and prejudice were also issues for women working in all forms of journalism in the twentieth century. Female journalists were routinely passed over for promotions, given inflexible work hours, and paid less than their male counterparts (Chambers et al., 28). Despite all of the obstacles women interested in pursuing journalism were forced to contend with in the early days of broadcast, the time period was also marked by several instances of significant change that benefited professional women.

Change for Female Journalists in the 20th Century

Improvements to the status of women in journalism paralleled improvements to the status of women in society as a whole during the twentieth century. The number of women working in journalism increased with the rise in popularity of the “women’s page” in the 1950s. The section provided new outlets for female-focused content (Chambers et al., 24). With the start of the women’s liberation movement in the 1960s, the number of women in journalism grew once again. Much of this growth can be attributed to changing social norms ushered in by second
wave feminists. Widespread access to effective birth control made it easier for women to pursue opportunities outside of the home. Women had greater access to higher education and married later than previous generations (Sonfield et al., 3).

Government initiatives also had an effect on the status of women in journalism: The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which made gender discrimination in hiring illegal, also prompted a steady growth in the number of women working at local television or radio stations (Chambers et al., 132). Mandates from the Federal Communication Commission also increased women’s representation in the industry. In 1969, the agency prompted stations to develop programming for minority group members. They also publicly denounced gender discrimination in a 1971 memorandum to broadcast license holders (Chambers et al., 133). Significant changes in hiring practices also occurred after the National Organization for Women (NOW) legally challenged a local television station’s license in the early 1970s. NOW alleged that the station “did not consult with women or women’s groups regarding women’s programming, presented a distorted and one-sided image of women, and employed a smaller percentage of women than any other local television station. (“National Organization of Women”) The industry as a whole took notice of the challenge. Female employment in the broadcasting jumped in the decade following the lawsuit (“National Organization of Women”).

Female journalists took several initiatives to change their status in the workplace as well. This may be best exemplified by a 1970 lawsuit filed by several female journalists against their employer, Newsweek magazine. Junior reporter Lynn Povich instigated the lawsuit. During her time at the magazine in 1960s, Povich noticed she was consistently being given fewer assignments and paid less than male colleagues with less reporting experience. Her female
colleagues shared her concerns. In 1970, Povich and 45 other female journalists at Newsweek successfully sued the organization for sex discrimination (Povich, 124). After a three year battle, the magazine began new hiring and career advancement practices that provided women with more opportunities for success within organization. However, before the lawsuit was filed, Povich said some women who were dissatisfied with their treatment simply left the industry (Povich, 210). Although nearly 50 years have passed since the lawsuit, research suggests that women still leave journalism for many of the same reasons Newsweek reporters described in their lawsuit (Everbach, 61).

Female Journalists and Retention

Today’s female journalists continue to struggle carving out careers and creating meaningful work in the industry even as the number of women graduating journalism school soars. According to a 2014 American Association of News Editors report as cited by Griffin, nearly two-thirds of journalism students are women, and yet women make up only one third of newsroom employees. Female journalism school graduates are also less likely than men to seek employment in newsrooms and to remain in the industry for more than 20 years (Griffin, 32). This is a considerably lower retention rate than in the business world. Although a popular explanation for this disparity is that family concerns motivate women to leave the instability of reporting careers, the literature suggests the reasons women abandon careers in journalism are many and nuanced.

In a study conducted in the late 1990s, researchers found that women who have left journalism cite unsatisfactory work environment as a top motivation for leaving the industry
In the almost 20 years since that study was released, not much changed. In her 2014 study in *Nieman Reports*, Anna Griffin revealed that women still experience workplace sexism when they pursue careers in journalism, and this can motivate them to leave the industry. Several factors could contribute to the creation of uncomfortable work environment. The author explained that women aren’t generally given leadership roles in newsrooms because they have “been discriminated against in ways both explicit and unintentional, because they’ve been labeled too brusque or too weak, or because they’ve opted out to raise children” (Griffin, 30).

Some of this “unintentional” discrimination is apparent in story assignment practices. Among a small sampling of women who eventually abandoned careers in professional news reporting, the majority claimed that they were often assigned to cover feature stories and women’s events instead of “harder” news stories about politics or community conflicts that were routinely assigned to their male counterparts. Women are also often assigned to write reactive stories (i.e. event previews and daily crime) than in-depth stories, which are again routinely assigned to men. Women also claim their employers were unwilling to assign flexible work hours (Everbach, 59). It may be assumed that these factors are often the result of a patriarchal news culture created in part by those in leadership.

Women are underrepresented in leadership positions in all forms of news media. In the US, women make up less than one third of all news directors at television news stations (Papper). Only eight of America’s largest newspapers are led by women. They are underrepresented as radio or television newscasters and hosts, and are typically given fewer on air reporting opportunities than their male counterparts (Chancellor, 25). This lack of female leadership in the industry might explain why the number of women working in journalism in general has remained
consistent since the late 1970s. Although, as mentioned in the introduction, public radio is an exception, as 44 percent of senior leadership positions in the industry belong to women.

Women and workplace culture

Ultimately, women struggle to achieve success in journalism for many of the same reasons women struggle in the corporate world. Workplace culture is defined by patriarchal values. This often prevents professional women from moving up in organizations and discourages them from remaining in their respective industries. This culture can manifest itself in the prevalent communication styles in the office. In workplace environments, men have a “transactional” communication style in that they tend to be assertive and agenda-driven. Conversely, women tend to have a “relational” style in that they tend to communicate gently and rely on non-verbal gestures (Mills, 54). Many of these differences are likely the result of social conditioning, and they may create barriers for women’s advancement. Female workers can thus be perceived as weak and under-qualified by their male colleagues despite the quality of their work. These differences are easily exemplified in ways men and women perceive the phrase “I’m sorry.” As noted by linguist Robin Lakoff, “Men use ‘I'm sorry’ almost always as a true apology: ‘I did something wrong and I need your forgiveness.’ Women say ‘I'm sorry’ sometimes for that reason, but a lot of the time as a way of saying -- just smoothing things over. As a way of saying, ‘I hope this won't be a problem for you, I hope you can work with it.’ But men hear ‘I'm sorry’ as they would say ‘I'm sorry’, that is, they hear it as a literal apology” (Lakoff, in Milne-Tyte). Women who apologize frequently are perceived as weak and ill-equipped by male colleagues
simply because they are unable to cross this socially constructed communication barrier (Milne-Tyte).

The stark differences in the way men and women communicate are even more evident in group work settings at the office. Women are often overlooked in meetings because their input is not framed in a way that is palatable to their male colleagues. For example, a woman may offer a suggestion in a meeting that is deemed irrelevant by co-workers. But when her male colleague offers the same input, it is accepted simply because he communicated the suggestion in a way his peers could understand. In this scenario, the construction of the suggestion is critical. The choices women make in crafting responses are categorized by what researcher Barbara Tannen calls “divergent” thinking. This means that while men are agenda driven (“convergent”), women are more apt to look for mistakes and missing issues in the decision making. (Tannen, in Milne-Tyte) This difference can easily lead to a disconnect in the office (Milne-Tyte).

In journalism, these communication gaps are even more pronounced. Because journalism is a communication-driven field, women may face more severe difficulties as a result of an inability to effectively communicate with their (male) editors or colleagues. Journalists are responsible for pitching their own story ideas. If these ideas are not deemed worthy of coverage by editors, they are often assigned stories than do not align with their interests. This structure can easily put the women in the industry at a disadvantage. Because women are generally more detail-oriented and analytical, their story pitches may center on issues editors find irrelevant or trivial. As a result, they can be assigned to cover stories that are “female-oriented.” This may explain higher rates of job dissatisfaction among female news reporters. The type of stories women are assigned to produce can adversely affect their job performance. Women are often
given particular stories because of perceived skills based in gender stereotypes. Female reporters are much more likely to report stories relating to human interest, consumerism, culture, and social policy. Whether they are assigned these stories or choose to pursue them on their own, they are often hindered by the nature of these topics (Everbach, 61).

Mentorship

When female reporters are given the opportunity to produce the stories they are interested in, evidence suggests they are not given the feedback they need to advance. Recent research shows that men in corporate environments are often uncomfortable giving direct feedback to their female employees (Hedges). Male supervisors cited fear of offending their employees as the chief reasons for withholding feedback. In all areas of the corporate world, effective feedback is a critical factor in improving job performance, increasing retention rates, and improving career satisfaction rates. When women are denied the opportunity to understand how to improve, it is impossible for them to rise to positions of power and influence in their organizations. This is also true in the media industry.

Reluctance to give feedback to female employees is an example of another major problem that working women face: networking in the office. Research indicates that employees who build relationships with co-workers and supervisors have more opportunities for advancement and are generally more satisfied with their careers than colleagues without strong networks (Scandura, 255). Similarly, young employees who find older, experienced mentors in their industries are more likely to be successful. Women tend to have difficulties in both building social networks in their industries and finding mentors in their careers. This may partially be
attributed to the fact that men are more likely to network with their male colleagues rather than their female colleagues (Scandura, 255). Because women are still a minority population in the corporate world, they have very few options when it comes to choosing colleagues to include in their professional networks.

In all areas of the professional world, mentorship is a critical factor in career advancement. This is especially true for women, partly because social norms discourage women from advocating for themselves and their work in the office (Wade, 65). Women are more likely to expect that the quality of their work will be recognized by their employer without their direct prompting. Conversely, men tend to directly advocate for themselves and explicitly draw attention to their achievements in the workplace. These traits are an asset when it come advancement. Women’s reluctance to advocate for themselves may explain why mentorship programs geared toward professional women have high rates of success. Research suggests that men are more inclined to advocate for other men in the workplace (Ibarra et. al.). When formal workplace programs are established to cultivate mentoring relationships, women benefit. Women who have mentors have, on average, higher rates of advancement and report being more satisfied in their jobs than women who do not have mentors. For women of color, the stakes may be higher. A 1999 study conducted by the International Women’s Media Foundation revealed that 47 percent of women journalists of color reported having a lack of access to high visibility assignments. 51 percent reported experiencing discrimination in promotions. Mentorship could be a critical factor in overcoming these obstacles, but research suggests these women struggle to find them. Nearly half of the women surveyed said not having a mentor prevented career advancement (“Women Journalists of Color”).
Mentorship and NPR

Mentorship has played a significant role in shaping the leadership structure in addition to workplace culture at National Public Radio. The voice of NPR is distinctly female, despite the fact that journalism is a male dominated profession (Loviglio, 68). The wealth of female reporters and hosts at NPR may be attributed to the influence of those who were in positions of power when the organization was established. Susan Stamberg, the first host of NPR’s flagship news magazine *All Things Considered*, is chiefly credited with attracting female talent to the network and creating more female friendly work environment at National Public Radio. Stamberg, who played an integral role in NPR’s launch in the early 1970s, was known to advocate for female reporters. She was instrumental in attracting Linda Wertheimer, Nina Totenberg, and Cokie Roberts to NPR in the 1980s. The three, nicknamed the “Fallopian Troika” by coworkers, were integral in defining the enduring tone of news coverage on the network. Their presence on the network may also have played a role in attracting another generation of female reporters and hosts to the network (Loviglio, 69).

Stamberg is also credited with creating a female-friendly workplace in NPR’s offices. She insisted upon working regular hours so she could tend to her family at the same time everyday. Because she was a in a position of power, her demands were met, and it became more acceptable at NPR to take time to attend to family obligations. But Stamberg was not the only factor in the creation of the gender equal NPR newsroom. Stamberg was hired by Bill Siemering, NPR’s first Director of Programming and the creator of *All Things Considered*. He also created NPR’s first mission statement, which, among other things, championed diversity. In the statement, Siemering
asserted that NPR “will regard the individual differences among men with respect and joy rather than derision and hate; it will celebrate the human experience as infinitely varied rather than vacuous and banal” (Siemering). These were values that were reflected in his hiring decisions. During a time when most journalism was considered an unsuitable environment for women, Siemering hired a news staff for *All Things Considered* that was nearly gender equal. At the time, many of Siemering’s decisions came under fire (Mitchell in Laissle, “NPR and Women”).

NPR’s executives were uncomfortable backing a relatively inexperienced reporting staff. Several members of the first *All Things Considered* cast had never worked in professional journalism. Siemering was not alarmed by this. In the years before NPR, he trained college students to create original radio newscasts and was integral in establishing a public radio station in a minority community in upstate New York. Through all of these experiences, he was convinced that anyone could be taught radio reporting techniques. When hiring, Siemering looked for “a sense of curiosity and authenticity” in candidates above all else (Siemering in Laissle, “NPR and Women”). He believes that this criterion prompted him to hire a more diverse staff than was typical at the time. While his executive peers agreed with the ideas he expressed in the mission statement, they were nervous about how his staffing decisions would affect the quality of the show (Mitchell in Laissle, “NPR and Women”).

Station managers around the country expressed similar concerns. When the first *All Things Considered* show was fed to new NPR member stations all over the U.S., Siemering said he heard more than a few concerns about his staffing choices. Although they were not disappointed by the quality of the news reporting as NPR executives had feared, many were unsatisfied with the sound of the show. Siemering explained several station managers were
concerned that there were too many female voices on the program, and that FM radio technology was not suited to high frequencies. Similar ideas were expressed during the early days of commercial radio in the 1930s, about 40 years prior to the first *All Things Considered* broadcast (Franks, 3). Siemering, who had spent a large portion of his career working with female reporters and managers in New York, ignored these concerns and did not share them with higher-ups. After several months, Siemering says he received more positive feedback from station managers, but was still at odds with NPR’s management. Siemering’s unusual staffing picks coupled with what many considered an “outsider” perspective led to his eventual dismissal from NPR (Mitchell in Laissle, “NPR and Women”).

Lasting Legacy

Although Siemering’s time at NPR was short, his impact on the organization was lasting. While the tone of NPR’s coverage changed from experimental to analytical after his departure, his staffing ideals prevailed over the years. In public media today, nearly 40 percent of hosting and executive producing roles are filled by women (Marcotte). Several conclusions can be drawn from these statistics. The first is that NPR became a more hospitable environment for women because so many women were already employed there (Ellis in Laissle, “Neenah Ellis”). The second conclusion that can be drawn from NPR’s diversity track record is that NPR has made a conscious effort to ensure that diversity is valued during the hiring process. Some research suggests that one of the most successful ways to ensure that organizations make diversity a priority is by holding them accountable for their hiring decisions. One of the best examples of this phenomenon is in the world of academia. As cited by Griffin, a 2012 study by the American
Council on Education revealed that 30 percent of all college presidents hired between 2009 and 2011 were women. This may be the case because colleges have formal personnel procedures. As Griffin explained her 2014 study, these kinds of policies, “one in which a certain number of applications must be considered, for example, or for which a diverse applicant pool is required, works to limit managerial discretion and to weaken old-boy networks, still the way many journalists climb the masthead” (Griffin, 34). NPR is one organization in journalism that has established such procedures (Marcotte).

Regional Public Radio Member Stations and Diversity

It is difficult to determine if the gender equity trend found in NPR’s headquarters translates to public radio member stations across the country. The structure of the public radio system indicates the numbers may be at least comparable. Because many public radio stations are licensed to universities, they are often subject to the same human resources standards as the larger university. As noted previously, hiring processes in academia are often rigorous and ensure members of underrepresented groups are considered. Low rates of compensation may also explain why more women are employed in public media. Research reveals that this may have somewhat affected the gender balance in public radio newsrooms (Roberts et al, 152).

According to RTDNA’s 2014 broadcast news survey, women are more likely to be employed by public media stations than commercial radio stations (Papper). However, public radio newsrooms are still far from gender equal. Marcotte’s data from 2011 reveals that 43 percent of all public media news staffs are women. This includes employees from both radio and television newsrooms. In public radio alone, the numbers are slightly higher. 46 of public radio
news personnel are women (Marcotte). For comparison, in the larger radio landscape, only 33 percent of news staff employees are women (Papper). The balance of women in leadership roles in public radio is very similar to the overall balance of women in the larger newsroom. 44 percent of those who occupy senior level leadership roles like executive producer and editor are women. 37 percent of public radio news directors are women. The numbers are significantly different in the larger radio environment (commercial and public radio), where only 20 percent of news directors are women (Papper). Strides have been made in the past few years in increasing the overall number of women working in radio news. Between 2013 and 2014, the percentage of women employed as news directors in radio news increased by 2.5 percent. However, much of this increase can be attributed to employment practices at public media stations (Papper).

Based on these numbers, it would appear that public radio newsrooms are doing slightly better than most the rest of the radio world. However, in order to get a complete picture of the status of women in public radio, more specific information still needs to be collected. In particular, it is important to understand how newsroom make-up shifts when different regions of the country and small versus large markets or rural versus metropolitan markets are examined. Some of these numbers have already been gathered for the radio landscape as a whole, which includes both public and commercial radio. They reveal large differences between large and small stations. In major markets, women make 41 percent of news staffs. These numbers decrease proportionally based on the size of the market. In medium markets, women make up 24 percent of newsrooms and in small markets, only 18 percent. This pattern is replicated when examining the percentage of women in news director positions in commercial radio. In major
markets, 29 percent of news directors are women. In medium markets, only 20 percent are women and in small markets that number drops to 11 percent (Papper).

This pattern isn’t all together surprising. Some of this disparity can be explained by the size of the news staff. In small markets, newsrooms may be staffed by as few as one person. This may explain why the average number of women working in newsroom in small markets is 0.3. Many of these stations are located in rural areas, and these numbers are consistent with employment trends of rural women. Women in rural areas are unemployed and underemployed at higher rates, have lower levels of educational attainment, and are also more likely to be mothers at young ages (Kim). All of these factors may prevent women from finding employment in radio news, as many positions pay very little, require a college degree, and involve working long hours away from home.

Accessing more specific information about where women are employed in public radio would provide more insight into this issue, but as will be explained in the next segment, that information, while existent, is hard to come by.

2. Reflection on Project: Challenges and Lessons Learned

In my professional project, a series of podcasts, I explored why women are attracted to public media by talking to the people who helped to structure the industry in its early days and to women who have chosen to pursue public broadcasting as a career. In the first podcast, I explored NPR’s gender equality track record by tracing the early development of its first syndicated show, All Things Considered. In the second piece, I highlighted the issues facing
women in public media today by focusing on a networking group created for women in public radio called Ladio. The third piece is a non-narrated extended interview with Neenah Ellis, a former producer for NPR and general manager of NPR member station WYSO.

For this paper, I also attempted to collect data to corroborate the theories that were related to me by women in the industry, although ultimately the attempt was only partially successful, as I will explain below. This was just one of several challenges that arose during the completion of this project.

The first challenge of the professional project was finding and contacting women in public media and arranging interviews. Although I’ve been working in public media in some capacity for the past three years, I’ve worked in a station that is led mainly by men. Therefore, I chose not to begin the interview segment of my research with co-workers. My first contact was Ashley Milne-Tyte, the host and producer of *The Broad Experience*, a podcast about women and workplace issues. At the start of my research, I had interned at the show for nearly a year and was aware of Ashley’s wide network in the public radio world. Ashley is a public radio reporter based in New York. She has worked at NPR member station WYNC and at the nationally syndicated show *Marketplace*. Through those experiences, she has cultivated a variety of contacts. Ashley was able to put me in touch with several women in the industry for interviews. I made contacts at the Third Coast Audio Festival, a conference that brings together people who work in public radio and audio journalism where I interviewed ten women.

One of the most significant obstacles during the interview process was the location of the sources. Almost all of the face-to-face interviews included in this project were conducted outside of Athens. By the end of the project, I had traveled to New York, Illinois, and Northeastern Ohio
to complete interviews. This was a significant burden, and it affected who I decided to contact for the project. The majority of the interviews were conducted and recorded over the phone, and in many cases the sound quality of the interview suffered as a result. Excessive phone tape is not suitable for air, and should only be used sparingly in long-form stories. This was a major factor in my decision to include particular interviews in the final professional project.

Despite location issues, each interview was conducted in much the same way. If the interview was conducted in person, I used a microphone recording kit to record our conversation after asking for the source’s permission. If the interview was conducted via phone, I used WOUB’s phone recording facilities to record the interview. Each source consented to being recorded. My aim with each interview with women in the industry was to try to get a sense of what made them pursue work in the field, and what made them stay. I also was interested in any challenges they faced in their careers. Many of these interviews were fairly informal and conversational. Sources were asked about their entrance into the industry, challenges they faced, and career trajectory. Some of the interviews were more extensive than others. The length and complexity of the interview were major factors when I was determining which stories to include in the final project. Ultimately, I chose to use interviews with Neenah Ellis, Bill Siemering, Jack Mitchell, Julia Furlan, and Patty Stokes in the final project.

I choose to interview Neenah Ellis for two major reasons: her reputation and her proximity. I met Neenah for the first time at the Third Coast Audio Festival, where she invited me to come and tour WYSO, the NPR member station she manages. Her name had been mentioned several times in previous conversations with colleagues at WOUB and Ashley Milne-Tyte. Neenah has worked in public media all over the country since the mid 1970s. Perhaps most
notably, Neenah was a producer at *All Things Considered* back when it was the only program syndicated by NPR. The was the facet of her career I immediately focused on, as I knew the show was pivotal in defining NPR’s hiring practices. After Third Coast, I followed up with Neenah and was able to visit her at WYSO, the Yellow Springs station she manages. At that point, I was just interested in learning more about WYSO, and understanding her journey through public media. We kept in touch after my visit, and eventually I scheduled a time to formally interview her for the project in one of WYSO’s studios. I choose to include Neenah’s interview in the final project because she was a beneficiary of NPR’s early hiring practices and could speak to the newsroom’s culture during the early years of the network. I also had a lot of material from her interview. It was over an hour long and very substantive.

During our first meeting, Neenah suggested I look into the Association of Independents in Radio’s (AIR) mentorship program. I applied for the program and was assigned to Julia Barton, the editor of Across Women’s Lives, a series broadcast by Public Radio International. Earlier in her career, she had worked on a story about the early days of NPR and interviewed Bill Siemering, the first programming director of *All Things Considered*, for the piece. Through earlier research, I had heard about Bill’s hiring practices at NPR, and was eager to talk with him. Julia was able to give me his contact information and I scheduled an interview with him soon afterward. I decided to use Bill’s interview because he was the architect of NPR’s newsroom and could explain why he structured the staff the way he did. Again, the interview was also very long and informative.

During our interview, Bill suggested I talk to Jack Mitchell, the author of an NPR history book and his successor at *All Things Considered*. I was able to get in touch with Mitchell fairly
quickly and completed an hour-long interview with him as well. In the project, I used Jack
corroborate some of the details conveyed to me through other sources. Jack was able to confirm
some of what Bill told me about hiring practices and NPR and elaborate on a couple of points
that Bill did not explain comprehensively. Jack also gave me a better idea about how NPR
progressed after Bill left.

For the second piece, I needed to get the perspective of a woman who had just started a
career in public radio. For that, I decided to attend a Ladio meeting. The Ladios are a group of
fairly young female radio producers living in New York who aim to integrate more female-
created radio content into the public radio industry. They meet monthly to discuss the challenges
facing female content creators and the steps that need to be taken to get women’s voices into the
mainstream radio world. The club also aims to facilitate relationships between older and younger
female members of the public radio community. At the Ladio meeting, I conducted several
interviews with members but decided to contact only one to arrange a longer interview. Julia
Furlan is an audio producer at Buzzfeed. She started her career in print but began working at
NPR member station WNYC after finishing graduate school. I chose to include her interview
because she is one of the founding members of Ladio. The interview was conducted over the
phone and lasted around 1 hour. However, the sound quality was more acceptable because I
asked Julia to use her own microphone to record her end of the conversation. Julia is a
charismatic speaker and embodied the culture of Ladio that I was hoping to convey in the piece,
so it was easy to decide to include her interview in the final project.

For the final interview, I decided to speak with Dr. Patricia Stokes, a women’s and gender
studies professor at Ohio University. I chose Dr. Stokes mainly because she was accessible and I
was looking to get an academic perspective on the topic. Our interview was extremely productive and I was able to use several of her quotes in the final project. Dr. Stokes also recommended several pieces of literature for use in my research.

Ethical Issues During the Interview Process:

Because most of my interviews were attained through communication with personal connections, a few ethical issues were bound to arise. The potential for a conflict of interest to occur during the course of the project was present. Also, because it’s often difficult to avoid building relationships with sources, I was forced to carefully examine my loyalties while creating the project. I was able to utilize several resources to figure out how to properly contend with these issues.

In the life and in the field of journalism, it is important to determine who to be loyal to and how to go about being so when contending with conflicting interests. I was reminded of this several times during the course of my thesis research and project work. The four types of loyalties established by William May (Patterson et. al., 85) were useful in determining what choices to make in a given situation. As a journalist, I must be loyal to humanity (my audience), professional practice (academic and journalistic standards), employment (WOUB Public Media and the Scripps School of Journalism), and public life. There was one particular instance during the project where I felt I needed to examine my loyalties to make the right decision.

The situation arose as result of my interview with former NPR programming director, Jack Mitchell. During our conversation, Mitchell relayed a rumor that he had heard about his colleague Bill Siemering during his time at NPR. Mitchell said some of their colleagues at NPR
believed the only reason Siemering hired so many young, inexperienced women at NPR was because he found them attractive. This was a revelation to me, as everyone else I spoke to about Siemering had glowing comments about him. I had to decide whether to include this comment in the final project. To make this choice, I examined my loyalties using an ethical decision making tool known as the Potter Box (Patterson et. al., 87).

The first step of the Potter Box is to understand the facts of the situation. The facts were fairly simple. I’d heard a rumor about one esteemed former NPR employee from another esteemed former NPR employee. This rumor was not substantiated in interviews with the subject of the rumor, Bill Siemering. It was not confirmed by Neenah Ellis or Julia Barton, other colleagues of Siemering’s. However, I was not able to get in contact with any other NPR employees who worked with Bill or Jack directly.

The second step is to outline the values involved in the case. A major value in this situation, and in all others involving journalism, is truth. If the rumor was true, I would be doing a disservice to my audience and organization by not including it in the story. If it was false and I decided to include it, I would be damaging the reputation of a man who has devoted his life to increasing diversity in public radio. Another value relevant to this case is privacy. I have an obligation to protect the privacy of my source, but I also acknowledge that privacy must sometimes be sacrificed in order to convey the truth. A third value is relevance, meaning that information needs to be relevant rather than just sensational in order to warrant publication. In this case, it could be argued that revealing the rumor would add an unnecessary sensational element to the story instead of enhancing it in a positive way.
The third step in the process is to apply relevant philosophical principles to the case. A utilitarian approach to this situation may have been to convey the rumor in the story, but make it absolutely clear that it is in fact a rumor and it is unsubstantiated by the other sources I interviewed. The argument to this approach would be that the greatest good is achieved by informing the public of the alternate narrative so that they are able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the larger story. In my opinion, this approach would have done a disservice to both the story and my source. It would have been reckless to convey a mere rumor that could greatly damage a source’s reputation without confirming it with at least one source first.

Alternatively, if was able to confirm the rumor, I would need to determine its relevancy within the larger story before deciding to include it. It would also be necessary to weigh privacy concerns in this situation against the public’s need to know. Another approach to this situation would be to follow Kant’s Theory of Human Dignity, which states that “humans require a certain degree of respectful treatment, not because of social norms, but because of their existence as rational beings” (Plaisance, 83). By this theory, I had a moral obligation to ensure that Siemering’s dignity was protected.

The fourth step is to articulate the loyalties involved in the situation. During this project, I was expected to be loyal to my sources, my school and its academic standards, and WOUB, the organization that was set to broadcast the stories. In order to loyal to my sources, school, and organization, I needed to focus on conveying what I knew to be in true in this situation. Ultimately, because none of my sources verified the rumor when prompted and due to privacy considerations, I did not feel comfortable including the information in the story.
This situation was not the only ethical issues I encountered while creating my professional project. Because I was interviewing women in the industry I hope to build a career in at some point, I knew a conflict of interest might arise. A conflict of interest is a “set of circumstances that creates a risk that professional judgment or actions regarding a primary interest will be unduly influenced by a secondary interest” (Wasserman, 229). By this definition, my interviewing women in the public radio industry for this project could have been seen as a ploy for me to find employment as I am aiming at a career in public radio. This type of conflict is considered “endemic” because it occurs as a result of “the nexus of institutional, potential, professional, and personal relationships” in which I worked (Wasserman, 238). Endemic conflicts of interest are considerably more difficult to avoid because they are often related to the nature of journalism itself (Wasserman, 238).

However, there are several ways to manage these types of conflicts: Wasserman (229-241) suggests several techniques that could help to lessen the effects of endemic conflicts of interest. The first is to foster in-house disclosure. In a newsroom environment, this would mean that the journalist should notify superiors and relevant members of the news staff about the potential for a conflict of interest as soon as possible. In my case, I notified my advisor about the potential for a conflict of interest in this project. Wasserman’s second technique is to ensure that there is internal oversight. In my project, my advisor served as the overseer of my work and choices. Both of these techniques were utilized to avoid conflict, but ultimately I relied on Wasserman’s disclosure technique to manage this conflict.

I made sure to make my intentions with each interview extremely clear to each source. I explained all aspects of the project and how each interview would be used. I made an effort to
inform each interviewee about the academic intentions of this project and made sure each source consented to the interview before we began. These steps did not all-together eliminate the potential for conflict of interest, but I believe they did help to minimize the risk.

While these ethical issues did create difficulties for me during my work on the project, the most significant challenge I faced was non-ethical and involved public records requests and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB). It began during my research into newsroom demographics at public radio member stations. I was interested in determining whether women were less likely to work in rural public radio stations. I contacted Mike Marcotte, a professor at the University of New Mexico. In 2009, he was contracted by CPB to collect census-type information about news staff at public media stations. Among other things, he used this data to derive the gender ratio in public radio member stations as a whole. He did not code this data based on region of the country or size of audience. I was interested in coding the data for these particular factors, and requested his research for that purpose.

Because he was under contract with CPB when he collected the data, Marcotte told me he couldn’t release his raw data to me. He said I could find out more by asking CPB for his research, called the Census of Public Media Journalists, and the most recent Station Activity Surveys (SAS). Each member station has to complete the SAS each year to receive grant funding from CPB. The SAS asks some of the same questions Marcotte did (job titles, gender, race, hire date of news staff members), but it also asks for salary information.

I contacted CPB’s data manager Mustapha Abdul and requested Marcotte’s research and Station Activity Surveys from the past 3 years. He told me he could only release the information that wasn’t confidential. When I asked if that data would be available via public records request,
he routed me to their press office. After consulting our public records experts in the School of Journalism, I requested Marcotte’s data and the most recent SAS results. I was denied on the basis that CPB was not subject to FOIA request. I was told that a diversity report would be released in the coming months. To date, I have received no such report.

A Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request allows members of the public to access unreleased information or documents that are under the control of the United States Government ("What is FOIA?"). Because CPB is funded entirely by tax dollars, it would be reasonable to assume their records would be accessible via FOIA request. As I found out, this is not the case because of an amendment to the act passed in 1971 (“Which agencies are covered?”). FOIA only allows access to documents controlled by a government “agency.” Even though CPB receives all of its funding through the federal government, it is not controlled by the government and is therefore not considered an “agency.” According to the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, many organizations under this category, like CPB, often have systems to allow members of the public to access their documents. To my knowledge, there is not such system in place at CPB. I continued to informally request the documents through several other avenues at CPB, but was again denied.

Marcotte had warned me of this possibility. When we spoke before I submitted requests to CPB, he told me that the organization had been extremely protective over his research. He suspected it was because it revealed that 50 percent of public media employees are unpaid. They are either interns or volunteers. In the wake of nationwide discussions about the ethics of unpaid interns (Hickman), Marcotte thought CPB may have been attempting to keep that revelation under wraps. This may explain why CPB refused to release the data to me as a courtesy.
Ultimately, CPB’s unwillingness to provide me with access to these documents drastically changed the direction of my thesis. Before this occurred, I intended to complete a data project about rural women and their place in public radio. Because I was unable to find comprehensive information or accurate data relating to public radio newsroom demographics, my focus became understanding what originally attracted and continues to attract women to public radio.

Conclusion

Ultimately, my research suggests that women are attracted to and thrive in public radio chiefly because the industry is structured to provide a work environment that is more in line with their needs. To put it simply, women are successful in workplaces where there are other women. When more women are present in a given workplace, mentorship relationships are likely to form between them. Women are more likely to be successful if they are given guidance and performance feedback by a more experienced person in their industry. As explained above, men are typically less comfortable providing feedback to women than to men and clearly this can serve as a barrier to advancement for women. Similar communication issues between men and women in the workplace are likely to decrease or become less problematic in gender equal environments.

Public radio had an advantage in creating a gender equal workplace from its outset. Newly-formed NPR’s fortuitous hiring of a diversity-conscious programming director and budgetary constraints shaped the news staff make-up at the network and perhaps as a result, NPR became to some degree defined by female voices. Public radio stations around the country may
have taken note of the larger network’s hiring tactics and followed suit. And because so many women were hired at these stations, mentorship relationships were likely to form. This may explain both retention rates and the number of women in leadership positions in public radio. Also, because public radio stations are often affiliated with universities, they tend to be subject to the same strict human resources diversity-based hiring practices. As a result of all of these factors, public radio stations are simply more likely to have women on staff.

This does not suggest the struggle is over for women in public radio. Women are still in the minority in rural public radio stations. Women in the public radio are less likely to be in commentator positions or host shows on their own. As is true in almost any industry in the U.S., maternal leave policies can be prohibitive. In the interviews, women from the industry reported that their female colleagues were less likely than their male counterparts to be given permanent positions at public radio stations. Some also felt that women were rarely given leadership roles despite their dedication to their work. (Furlan in Laissle, “Mentorship”). These are all issues that can serve as barriers to success for women.

At least at Ohio University, steps could be taken to address these issues by increasing the number of women working in public radio. The E.W. Scripps School of Journalism currently offers no courses that explore radio broadcasting comprehensively. While one course does include some audio journalism instruction, it is mostly focused on television news production. I believe that this does a disservice to our university as a whole, but it can argued that women are the most acutely affected. As was discussed in this research, women in journalism have found a kind of haven in public radio. During a time when most of the women who graduate from journalism school choose not to pursue it as a career, it is critical that schools at least provide an
introduction to radio broadcasting to open up this potential career path. If more resources were allocated to this field, I believe that more female graduates would choose to remain in journalism because they would be provided the tools needed to be successful in an industry that is both growing and historically hospitable to female journalists.
Works Cited


Laissle 36
Appendix: Links to Professional Project

Podcast 1: NPR and Women

https://soundcloud.com/alaissle/npr-and-womenwav

Podcast 2: Mentorship and Public Radio


Podcast 3: Neenah Ellis Extended Interview

https://soundcloud.com/alaissle/neenah-ellis-extended-interview